



THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI

College of Health
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March 4, 2011

Social Worker of the Year Selection Committee
National Association of Social Workers, Mississippi Chapter
P.O. Box 5599
Pearl, MS 39288-5599

Colleagues,

I wish to nominate Lori Woodruff for recognition as Social Worker of the Year. We are fortunate that our profession is rich with individuals worthy of praise. Yet, having hired and then supervised Lori directly for five years, and watching her for nearly three years "from a distance" in her role as deputy administrator of MDHS/DFCS, I say with confidence that I know of no one about whom social work superlatives more easily flow. Lori is, beyond doubt, among the most "passionate," "committed," "dauntless," "creative," "tireless," "resilient," "values-driven," "selfless," "insightful" (I could go on) of social workers among us. I believe there is no one more deserving of the highest esteem of her peers – the esteem that I think this award represents.

Accomplishment.

Lori's chief accomplishment lies in the remarkable progress so far achieved in the top-to-bottom reform of Mississippi's long-languishing child welfare system required by the *Olivia Y. v. Barbour* litigation settlement. As chair of the voluntary "Mississippi Citizen's Review Board," I have tracked this progress closely since settlement agreement implementation began. I have observed with delight and confident hopefulness the hiring of new administrators and social workers statewide (13 of 14 executive managers at the state office were hired by Lori); the reorganization and rebuilding of the administrative, training, and service delivery infrastructure across the state; the forging of new, functional collaborative relationships (e.g. with universities, judges, law enforcement) and the termination of dysfunctional ones; the development and refinement of comprehensive, integrated plans; the adoption and aggressive dissemination of progressive child and family-centric service models.

The past year has been especially active, as a wide range of reform efforts gained traction, including implementation of the Practice Model System, preparation for introducing the Casey

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Family Roundtable Initiative, and extensive training of both supervisors and line workers. The year 2010 ended with more than 550 direct service workers carrying caseloads.

Leadership.

Leadership is literally synonymous with the challenges of comprehensive system reform. Every trait typically associated with truly transformational leadership – vision, inspiring and modeling for subordinates, constant communication, creative and accountable collaboration, team building, empowering others, etc. – is demonstrated (if indeed not severely taxed) on a near-continuous basis.

I know that following the settlement agreement, there was great anxiety about finding and hiring someone of sufficient experience and tested multi-dimensional competence to succeed in executing the agreement, tantamount to launching change of a magnitude and scope never before seen in Mississippi. That anxiety was justified, I believe, as I told all the constituents (including Children's Rights attorneys, the court monitor, and a number of agency administrators) who spoke with me. Fortunately, the agency discovered and recruited Lori to lead the reform. The choice was correct, and, I am quite certain, never regretted.

Lori's leadership has been continuous, but surely no more seriously tested in the past year, as the agency grappled, successfully, with a variety of setbacks and shortfalls.

Social work image.

Social work and social work's image have prospered enormously under Lori's administration, and especially in the past year. Social work is today again recognized as the pre-eminent human service profession, and the "proper" one to serve children and families in the most professional, ethical, and effective manner possible. As a result, more Mississippians are attending school to become entry-level social workers, and to advance from baccalaureate to master's level social work practice (there are currently approximately 150 agency employees pursuing graduate social work studies). More social workers are being hired into positions of service and leadership (the three top direct reports to Lori all hold the MSW). Comments by Mississippi public officials, and media coverage generally, is certainly more favorable than at any time I can remember.

Risk to achieve change.

Ah, if only external rewards were commensurate with the risks involved in making change! Lori alone can know the full extent of their reach, but no doubt the risks are painfully large in the crucible of "24/7" pressure and absorption in the endless stream of tasks, problems, crises. Personal time, "having a life," is at risk. Health and well-being are at risk. Reputation and career development are at risk. "Opportunity costs" – all the other personally or professional rewarding things that one might be doing – are sacrificed to the unrelenting demands of system reform.

Throughout my time as a social work educator, I have been fond of asserting that ours is “the greatest profession” for two main reasons – first, because we have a passionate commitment to change the world, and, second, because we have the tools – the knowledge and skills – with which to do it. I know of no individual who better exemplifies the social work commitment to change, and the social work skills needed to make change, than Lori Woodruff.

Sincerely,



Michael Forster, PhD, LCSW
Professor and Dean

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UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF MISSISSIPPI
B. Walston, Reporter
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